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ABSTRACT

Five problematic terms (disciplinarity, epistemology, mission, orthodoxy, and inertia) speak to the future of writing across the curriculum (WAC) at the college and university level. Inertia makes all the programmatic issues of strict disciplinarity, rigidly objective epistemologies, anti-educational missions, and entrenched orthodoxies just that much harder to combat. WAC goes deep into the heart of the whole academic enterprise by challenging passive learning and routine training. The good news is that for more and more teachers, WAC ideas have become the norm. (RS)

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THE FRIENDS AND ENEMIES OF WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

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Let me say at the outset that the term WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM (WAC) is compromise terminology, rather limited yet still useful. Elementary teachers describe a similar concept by the term "whole language." Secondary teachers more commonly use the term "language and learning across the curriculum"--which is certainly closer to my own understanding of the WAC ideas. However, at the college level you can't use "language" because to faculty it connotes "foreign" languages. And you can't use "learning" because it connotes "education" as in "school-of-education" so that won't work either.

So most of us, including the CCCC program writers, continue to use James Britton's twenty-year old term "writing across the curriculum"--which has a good hard, academic edge to it. As I see it, this term includes "whole language" and "active learning" and "literacy" and "critical thinking" and "student-centered pedagogy," and, finally, "curricular reform."

I have organized this overview talk around five problematic terms that speak to the future of "writing across the curriculum" at the college and university level. Though I have tried to make the terms large and comprehensive, they are, in fact, arbitrary and shifty. For one thing, they have less to do with "writing" than you might expect. For another, every term I chose suggested still others that seemed equally appropriate--so I settled for what seemed like good terms at the time. In addition, for rhetorical purposes, I describe a lot of things as black or white, knowing full well that truth demands shades of gray. Here are the terms:

1. DISCIPLINARITY. The first term is DISCIPLINARITY--the organizing principle behind most twentieth-century institutions of higher education. Disciplines are composed of discrete subject areas and studied according to some agreed-upon methodology. Of course, some areas called disciplines seem, at least to me, more discrete than others--"history" for example, moreso than "English"--but no matter, for they both end up as identifiable departments within particular colleges teaching courses and lobbying against each other for resources. So the notion of disciplines is behind the notion of departments which is behind the separateness and isolation in the college community that programs such as "writing across the curriculum" attempt to address. This same rigid disciplinary organization remains a major obstacle to successful writing-across-the-curriculum programs.

As I said, discrete disciplines mean separate departments, which mean competition among departments for space, equipment, faculty, and undergraduate

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majors. It means specialized research--and more competition for space, equipment, faculty, and graduate students. It means the development of esoteric nomenclature to identify otherwise common ideas--like the term "esoteric nomenclature" when I mean "jargon."

When DISCIPLINARITY really works on college campuses it often means that truly successful departments acquire separate buildings to house only their own offices and classrooms, lounged and lunchrooms--guaranteeing that departmental members can go through whole days without ever interacting with a colleague from another discipline, thus making a mockery of Paul Goodman's notion of a "community of scholars." Never mind that Clifford Geertz, among others, might argue that the real problems of the world have rather "blurry" lines and are seldom confined to single-discipline solution (Local Knowledge, 1983).

I would suggest that writing-across-the-curriculum programs thrive best when faculty from the different disciplines share some of the same physical and conceptual space, talk with each other, share common ideas and problems--about both research and teaching--and work together for common academic and social purposes.

A friendlier term is INTERDISCIPLINARITY, which implies collaborative efforts among both faculty and students in research and teaching--a true community of scholars. It implies the seeking after, learning, and mastering of common language--what Elaine has called "world citizen talk"--by those who have already mastered more esoteric and exclusive ones. And it implies a more open and necessarily exploratory curriculum. Look for colleagues and administrators who support INTERDISCIPLINARITY. We need to argue that language--especially each student's own--can be the glue that holds such programs together.

2. EPISTEMOLOGY. This second term is a tough one (at least for me when it comes to remembering what it means), EPISTEMOLOGY is the term we apply to the "study of the nature and origins of knowledge." We each have one, whether we identify it or not, and it governs much of what we do in both our work and play. We each believe that we know what knowledge is, where it exists, who generates it, why and when, and how to critique it. College and university teachers reveal their epistemological beliefs all the time as they read, write, talk, and teach.

Faculty with more objective EPISTEMOLOGIES believe that knowledge is something made and transmitted by experts to novices (teachers to students). (Here you must bear with me for creating overly-simplistic categories; human belief and behavior and are certainly more than I'm about to make out--but simple polarities make more dramatic points.) Faculty who are confident that the world is as they describe it, who believe that knowledge is certain, view teaching and learning as, primarily, the transmission of knowledge one to another--what Paulo Freire calls the "banking method" (depositing knowledge into accounts to be withdrawn later). They emphasize the covering knowledge rather than discovering it. As a consequence they answer questions students never asked, lecture rather than discuss, test rather than explore, and rely on the certainty of numbers over the

wishy-washiness of words. As most of you have probably discovered, faculty with these beliefs and methods will have a hard time with the concept and value of "writing across the curriculum."

More receptive will be teachers with more subjective EPISTEMOLOGIES, who believe that knowledge is meaningful only when learners participate in its making--or as Anne Berthoff would say in its "composing." They believe that students must be at the center of their own learning. That students must help pose as well as solve problems; value process as well as product; discovery more than 'covery.' Such beliefs commonly lead to a distrust of numbers and a reverence for the messiness of language, in all its nearly inseparable modes. (My experience with some of you here tells me that you share these more subjective and tentative beliefs.)

My experience also tells me that the subjectivity or objectivity of one's world view is seldom decreed by one's discipline. I personally know too many objective historians and teachers of literature (not, of course, teachers of writing) and I now too many subjective chemists and mathematicians.

It should come as no surprise that "writing-across-the-curriculum programs" will thrive to the degree that you have on your campus--and recruit to help you--faculty and administrators who understand and value the personal, exploratory, messy nature of both the language and learning processes.

3. MISSION. I have settled on the term MISSION to describe the third category of "writing across the curriculum" issues. By MISSION I mean the institutional one that governs the allocation of resources on every campus. The term implies priorities--which in turn implies politics: What is the stated mission of your college or university? Who decided this? When? With whose input? This category, as I see it, includes so much of what academics encounter as they go about their daily business: course loads; teaching schedules; the number of class preparations; the number of students; the objectivity of tests; the subjectivity of writing assignments; and classroom size and configuration--as well as the nature and length of your year-end reports to department head and dean.

In other words, here we are talking about the principle that explains the allocation of resources to one college or department rather than another. The institutional mission which determines whether or not the numbers will be in your favor: the numbers of students, FTE's, classes fellowships, assistantships, colleagues, publications, and travel expenses.

Obviously, if the mission statement reads "research" the budget tilts one way; if it reads "teaching" (less and less likely) it tilts another. Community colleges receive one level of funding from the state legislature, research universities another. Private liberal arts schools go after one source of funding; specialized technical schools another. And so on.

The mission statements of the large research universities mitigate against writing-across-the-curriculum programs in obvious ways: Yes, small teaching loads, but also large classes, inflexible lecture halls, a reliance upon graduate assistants,

and a reward structure that elevates publishing and grant-getting above teaching and advising. Mission statements of community colleges also mitigate against WAC in other ways: Yes, allowing small classes, but requiring five of them. And mission statements at elite private schools cause still other problems by assuming that, as far as language skills go, their students are already fixed.

4. ORTHODOXY. This fourth category, ORTHODOXY, is another tough one. I'm thinking here of the title of a Donald Graves' talk at the 1988 NCTE Convention, "The Enemy is Orthodoxy," in which he describes overhearing teachers ask each other "Do you teach the 3-step Graves composing process or the 5-step?" Of course, the same thing happens to "writing-across-the-curriculum programs" when they become curricularized: Catalogue says on page 24 that "students need to take 2 'writing intensive' (or 'extensive') courses to graduate"--so what counts as a writing-intensive course? And who teaches it? And training has she had? And what happens when he goes on sabbatical? And isn't it cheaper to hire part-timers to teach them because we have to offer at least 10 (or 50 or 100) sections each year? And what about speaking across the curriculum--how many of those should we have? Sound familiar?

There are other versions of ORTHODOXY too: how about the "cult of correctness" that governs many academic disciplines, with well-meaning professors across the curriculum believing it their sacred duty to rout out all error wherever and whenever they find it; who, with red pen in hand, respond with corrective reflex to all drafts of student writing as if they were Dr. Strangelove saluting the Fuhrer.

Or how about what I call the "cult of arrogance": "Look, I'm only 28 and I have two Ph.D.'s, speak six languages, and have published twelve books--so what's wrong with today's eighteen-year-olds.

Or how about the ORTHODOXY some of us know daily: "THIS IS A DEPARTMENT OF LITERATURE! Grad students and adjuncts can teach the writing."

We need to counterbalance such ORTHODOXIES on our campuses by supporting an equally strong tradition of INNOVATION that is supportive of more fluid and experimental programs. We need to locate or recruit or hire colleagues and administrators who challenge ORTHODOXIES and encourage us to do the necessary research--in classrooms as well as libraries--to support and validate innovative ideas.

5. INERTIA. My final term is INERTIA, the one sure killer of innovative and experimental programs. I have come to believe it far more deadly to the aims of writing across the curriculum than right or left wing political conspiracies, General Motors, or George Bush. We are busy people. We work with busy people. In fact the better the teacher or researcher, the busier he or she is. Every good teacher at my own university seems flat out most of the time. Where's the extra time to learn a new pedagogy or design a new program? It's simply easier to let things alone. (After all it's already late March--only six weeks of classes left.)

INERTIA take many forms: the INERTIA that keeps us teaching the same courses year after year. The INERTIA that keeps us teaching the way we've always taught. The INERTIA that preserves old lecture notes, that prevents us from designing new assignments or assigning new books, that makes it difficult to learn more than a few student names, that keeps the chairs arranged in rows so that janitors can more easily clean the floors, that makes it easier to simply tell students what they need to know rather than design structures to help them find out for themselves.

INERTIA makes it easy to resist faculty development programs--such as writing workshops. "Hey I've never had an ED methods course in my life and I'm not going to start now. Teaching's teaching."

And the INERTIA that makes it easy for me to stop planning and offering follow-up writing workshops. And to put off lobbying new deans and provosts for continued funding. And to locate new resources to evaluate my six-year-old program to demonstrate that, yes, something really is happening at the University of Vermont.

And, last of all, INERTIA makes all these programmatic issues that I've been describing just that much harder to combat: the strict DISCIPLINARITY, the rigidly objective EPISTEMOLOGIES, the anti-educational MISSIONS, and the entrenched ORTHODOXIES. WAC programs won't make it if they can't create alternative and energic structures to challenge the dated and deadly assumptions by which establishment educational institutions continue to operate.

I'm almost done now. But I really want to end on an optimistic note, with friends not enemies. Ultimately the movement Elaine describes as maturing I would also describe as having enormous staying power. A lot of things have come and gone in the past decade (remember "sentence combining"? "computer literacy"?). But the really basic stuff--composing, conferring, revising--doesn't go away.

It's no secret that the real friend to good teaching and research--not to mention social and species survival--is our willingness to change and get ever better at what we do--which in our business, at every one of our schools, includes what we do in the classroom.

What seems clear about Writing across the Curriculum, no matter what we choose to call it, is that it goes deep into the heart of the whole academic enterprise. No matter the specific shape of your own program, whether it's pre-disciplinary or disciplinary or post-disciplinary, it challenges passive learning and routine training wherever in the curriculum they occur.

The good news is that I've been meeting more and more teachers for whom WAC ideas have become the norm. Who would no longer even think of teaching the old way because these ideas about learning make teaching more engaged, exciting, and surprising. In this scenario WAC wins because it becomes habit--and so develops an INERTIA of its own--and so becomes hard to displace. Think for a minute: can you still remember when you didn't include some informal writing in your class? When you didn't encourage students to collaborate and learn from

each other as well as from you? When you didn't assign papers in multiple-draft sequences?

If you do think about it, when our teaching is more engaged, exciting, and surprising, it's actually easier and more fun. In the end, anything that can do that wins.